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ABSTRACT

This report, given at a special meeting held in Tehran, differentiates between children's books published by mass-market publishers and by quality publishers and discusses related factors, such as pricing and distribution, artwork, writing, professional associations, printing, the British tradition, translation, and publishing statistics. (JM)

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE SERVICE OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING AND PEACEFUL CO-OPERATION

ORGANIZED BY THE
INSTITUTE FOR THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS
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Children's Literature in the Service of

International Understanding and Peaceful Co-operation

Tehran, 15-21 May 1975

Children's Books in the United Kingdom

Paul Langridge

England

TYPES OF PUBLISHING

Children's book publishing in Great Britain falls into two clearly defined categories:

1. Mass-market publishers. These are concerned with a low-quality, high volume business. Their books are largely sold through non-traditional book outlets, such as newsagents, supermarkets etc. Although some non-fiction is produced, the bias is strongly towards colour story books, either traditional or modern, and the emphasis is very much on low price rather than on quality of artwork, paper or design.

An important area of this type of publishing is the Annual market. These books are produced for the Christmas season and are usually based on popular characters from Television or story books and consist of a number of stories linked by games, puzzles etc. The sales of some of these Annuals rises as high as 250,000 or more during the season.

2. Quality publishers. These are the publishers whose products form the bulk of bookshop and library stock in the U.K. The emphasis is firmly on good printing, quality of text, lay-out and high standards of art-work. This is the type of publishing with which I and the publishers Association are concerned so that the rest of this paper refers solely to this area of production.

PRICING AND DISTRIBUTION

The prices of children's books have risen sharply in the last few years. A typical 32 page picture book printed in four colours sells for between £2.00 and £2.50, while a novel of 192 pages, with some black and white line drawings, will sell for around £2.50. Although these prices are beyond the pocket of the average child, there is now an enormous range of paperback books covering both fiction and non-fiction for all ages. The prices of these range between 35p and 70p. An indication of the popularity of the paperback is shown in the sales last year of one major company. They sold 8½ Million copies.

Hardback sales are largely confined to Libraries and the gift market. We have in Britain an extensive public and school library service which makes it possible for any child to have free and easy access to a large range of books. Of course, not all libraries are of an equal standard but, over all, the system is a successful one.

There are a few specialist children's bookshops in the U.K. but nearly all bookshops stock a number of children's books and the larger ones have substantial, separate departments. These carry both hard and paperbacks.

A recent development is the school bookshop, often run in collaboration with a local bookseller. These are small shops in schools selling a wide range of paperbacks direct to the pupils.

ARTWORK

The standard of artwork in British children's books is very high. There is no traditional style and artists freely interpret the stories they are illustrating. The Library Association awards the Kate

Greenaway Medal (named after a distinguished illustrator) every year to the best artist of that year. Recent winners have included John Burningham, Raymond Briggs and Charles Keeping. Colour is now used almost exclusively for picture books, though it is becoming very expensive.

Novels for older children, that is 11 years old and more, are rarely illustrated and those for younger children tend to contain black and white drawings. In addition to native British artists, a number of illustrators from overseas who are now resident in Britain are adding richness and variety to the publishing scene.

WRITING

Although there are some distinguished adult novelists who write for children, the literature for the young is largely the province of specialists. The type of books will be dealt with at greater length below.

It is worth mentioning that the Library Association awards the Carnegie Medal for the best children's book of the year at the same time as the Kate Greenaway Medal mentioned above. The Guardian newspaper also gives a similar award.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

The two main professional associations in Britain are The publishers Association and The Booksellers Association. The latter has recently formed a specialist group of children's booksellers but, that apart, it is the work of the publishers Association that is most relevant here.

The Children's Book Group of the Publishers Association consists of 97 member firms. It is concerned with making the maximum number of

books available to the maximum number of children. Its major effort in this area has been the organisation of an annual bookshow in London or in a major provincial centre. These shows consist of some 3000 books and have been designed to appeal to the child who would not normally go into a bookshop. Attendances over a period of a week have been as high as 23,000 and although this figure includes teachers and other adults, children make up about two thirds of the total. The Group has now abandoned the one major show and is trying to establish a number of smaller, regional shows as well as starting a National Children's Books Week.

A unique British institution is the Federation of Children's Book Groups. This is run on a part-time, unpaid basis, by a group of volunteers, mostly women with children, who are concerned with bringing better books to children. They organise meetings on a regional basis, run small bookshops under licence and have now begun a mail-order service for people who are unable to buy the books they want from their local bookshops or live too far from a shop.

PRINTING

British publishers use a wide variety of printers producing books not only in the U.K. but in such places as Hong Kong, Spain, Italy and Holland. Both letterpress and litho methods are used, the former for such books as novels and the latter for picture books.

THE BRITISH TRADITION

The last ten years have been regarded by many experts as a Golden Age in children's books.

In both writing an illustration a large number of exciting new

talents have arisen. The oral tradition of telling folktales has not existed in any widespread way for a number of years but, instead, the British have developed a talent for 'fantasy'. By that is meant a story set either in a totally imaginary country or one in which the past merges with the present. Authors such as Alan Garner, Philippa Pearce, Penelope Lively, J.R.R.Tolkien, Joan Aiken, William Mayne, C.S.Lewis and Lucy Boston are good examples.

There has also been a trend towards socieally realistic novels recently. Set usually in industrial backgrounds they are tough stories of everyday life with which a child, raised in that environment, can readily identify. Although this idea has been mostly used in novels it has been carried over into some picture books - notably those by Charles Keeping. Writers of social realism include John Rowe Townsend, Roy Brown and K.M.Peyton.

The historical novel is also popular. English history is rich in incident and all periods from the Romans to the beginnigg of this century are used as sources of inspiration. Rosemary Sutcliff, Leon Garfield, Barbara Willard, Cynthia Harnett and Geoffrey Trease are all important writers of historical novels.

It is true that the standard, of non-fiction is not as high as that of fiction in the U.K. Indeed, The Times Literary Supplement has instituted an award to help encourage better quality books in this area. They should not be confused with school books, which are intended for class use, but should be regarded as information books for the child to learn, with the maximum pleasure, about the world around him.

Television has also influenced the type of books that children

read. The British Broadcasting Corporation, through its own company and through others, is producing a number of books related to television programmes, both stories and non-fiction, and these have a wide circulation.

TRANSLATION

In comparison with the total number of books published in Great Britain, translations occupy only a small part. This is partly through reasons of cost and partly because each country tends to produce a literature of its own which does not readily travel. Excluding folk tales which come from all countries, translations from the Scandinavian countries, Germany and Switzerland are the most frequent. Pictures books are the most often translated, partly because the simple stories have a more universal appeal and partly because the high cost of printing colour makes co-editions necessary.

STATISTICS

In 1974 there were 2618 children's Books published in the U.K. This excludes all class text books. In the first 4 months of this year 810 new books were published.

There are 97 member firms of the publishers Association actively involved in publishing children's books and about 12 outside the publishers Association. All are commercial firms and receive no form of Government subsidy.

There are over 6000 Libraries (excluding school libraries) in the British Isles.